

“The Heavenly Banquet”

In our Gospel passage from Luke 14, Jesus teaches us the ethics of humility along with a foretelling of the heavenly banquet. Meals were important social ceremonies in Jesus’ culture. Little was left to chance. People noticed when one ate, with whom one ate, whether one washed before eating, and where one sat to eat. All these matters concerned one’s social position. This passage is quite fitting today as we receive the meal of Holy Communion.

Luke 14: 7-14 provides a framework of the interpretation of the “two parables.” The first section is dedicated to the guest (v.7) and the second section to the host (v.12). In the first section, guests are reminded that when attending a banquet it is better to be asked to move up than to be moved down. This is essentially the lesson of today’s lesson from Proverbs 25:6-7 when we are reminded that it is better to be told “Come up here,” than to be lower in the presence of a noble. Honor is not gained by seeking prominence; it must be given by others. Remember Jesus’ adage that the first will be last and the last shall be first (Luke 13:30).

Humility is not be made a show as a strategy for recognition. Humility is a quality of life open to persons who know their worth is not recognition from peers but by the certainty that God has accepted them. When Jesus declares in continuity

with the Hebrew Bible, that “all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted (v.11), he is reminding his disciples that vanity and bombast lead to devastation, and that humble service leads to the only glory that matters: being good and worthy in the eyes of God and our fellow human beings.

Luke 14:12-14 contains Jesus’ directions to the hosts of a meal. It’s interesting whom he says not to invite. Don’t invite your friends, your relatives, your rich neighbors. In today’s world we could add don’t invite your business associates, the politicians. Basically, don’t invite those who will benefit you, the ones you normally invite. Why? Well, we could curry favor from them. They might return the invitation. One might expect a *quid pro quo*, a gain to both sides.

Jesus’ point, ultimately, is not to deny our welcome to those closest to us but to extend our welcome to those whom others tend to forget or ignore. Why is this so important? Because to invite the unseen and unregarded is to embody the living antithesis to self-aggrandizement and self-promotion. Instead of plotting what you can get, ask how you can serve and what you can give. Those who we should invite are those who are usually unwelcome, who could never return the favor, who will never be our superiors. This is the vision of the Kingdom of God, the heavenly banquet.

I usually prepare my sermons at the Greenville County library. A number of homeless and underprivileged persons usually come there. I have noticed they store their bedrolls at the tables they use. As I prepare this sermon I look at on the lawn and see several on their bedrolls napping under a tree. It occurs to me, am I willing to invite them to feast with me? I believe this is what Jesus wants me to do.

What do Jesus' lessons on humility and hospitality mean for us today? We have to recognize that humility is how we remain in right relationship with others and with God. We have many in our culture today, including some so-called ministers of the Gospel, who are arrogant and do not exhibit the humility required by Christ. They are engaged in self-promotion. Even the local minister at times fails to remain humble. At times we fall into the trap of only thinking about our careers, what our next promotion will be. We take our eyes off God.

Arrogance destroys. Those who glorify themselves at the expense of others end up ruining relationships at every turn. As the book of Proverbs warns, "arrogance yields nothing but strife." (13:10). God finds egotism detestable. Proverbs again: "Every haughty person is an abomination to the Lord" (16:5).

Why is arrogance so bad? For one thing, a person who spends all his time admiring his own achievements (whether real or imagined) quickly forgets how much he needs others. We are all inescapably dependent on others---parents who

birth us, teachers who nurture us, farmers who feed us, factory workers who help clothe us. And to be alive is to be dependent on God. As Rabbi Held points out, the Talmudic sages insist that one who becomes full of himself denies the reality of God.

At bottom, arrogance is a form of forgetfulness. The only words we remember are *I and Me*. This forgetfulness can have ethical consequences. When we exalt ourselves, we forget how much we owe to others. We run the risk of granting ourselves moral license. After all, the rules apply only to our inferiors. A proverb reminds us that arrogance often ends up embracing injustice and lawlessness: “Better to be humble among the afflicted than to share spoils with the proud” (16:19). Perhaps this is why Proverbs is so insistent that pride goes before the fall. “When arrogance appears, disgrace follows,” we are told (11:2); “pride goes before ruin; arrogance, before failure (16:18). Earning the enmity of God and other people, we all but guarantee our own destruction.

Practicing humility frees us from our culture’s contest of power and esteem. One should practice humility because it is a prudent means of avoiding embarrassment. The practice of humility is proper and prudent for disciples of Christ, because it is a learning process for how the Kingdom of God will bring

about a revolutionary reversal---the very standards and practices of discrimination will be overthrown.

In closing, let us remember that those who live by Kingdom standards and values now will not only bear witness to the Kingdom but will be rewarded in the “resurrection of the righteous” (v.14). Righteousness, not social position or the esteem of others, should be our goal. As we prepare to remember Jesus’ last meal, let us remember that Jesus’ meals in his ministry foreshadowed the inclusiveness of God’s kingdom. We face many issues in the church today, but one should not be who we eat with. If it is, it is time we humbled ourselves and learned new table manners.